

A novel approach

A new training guide that advocates rewarding with food and remembering to smile offers a fresh approach to teaching a gundog, finds **David Tomlinson**

Book or DVD? Reviewing the latest Paul French Video productions for *Gundogs* (8 December) reminded me of just how good a DVD can be as a training aid. Unlike the old VHS tapes, a DVD gives you instant access to the part of the film you want to watch, as you can easily fast-forward the sequences you want to skip. Frustratingly, however, watching DVDs is a sure way to send me to sleep. The cure for this is to watch a DVD armed with my notebook, as by making notes I have to concentrate and thus, stay alert.

Books may be old technology compared with DVDs, but they are rather more versatile, as you don't need a television to play them, and you can read them anywhere, from your bed to the bus [Ed: Just like high-quality magazines]. They also have the great advantage of being much cheaper. I've recently been reading *The Pet Gundog*, by Lez Graham, the paperback edition of which costs a mere £15.50, including post and packing. If you're feeling flush, there's a bigger coffee-table version for £21.05. It's an attractive publication enlivened with plenty of action photographs by Nick Ridley. Lez is well qualified to write the book, as she works full-time with dogs as a canine behaviour practitioner, runs her own training classes and works her dogs, a golden retriever and a Labrador.

As the title suggests, this isn't a book you are likely to buy if you are planning to train your dog to win the next

▼ In addition to the basic training methods, Lez Graham advises teaching your dog how to retrieve by getting it to pick-up phones and car keys

► *The Pet Gundog* features a number of novel teaching methods that are absent from many other training manuals

retriever or spaniel championship. It is, however, a reminder that the majority of gundogs in this country are pets, even though many of them also work. If I worked as often as my spaniels, I would be very poor, as their annual period of unemployment extends from February through to mid-October. Lez also acknowledges the fact that many people buy gundogs as pets then decide that they want to do something more with them than simply a walk in the park.

Many people acquire their first gundog without ever considering what the word "gun" in front of "dog" implies. In the first chapter, Lez explains that such an animal is a highly intelligent, high-energy working dog, and that she has seen far too many gundogs dominating their owners and destroying their homes because they were bored out of their minds. Dogs that have been bred for generations to work don't take kindly to being forced into sedentary lives and being screamed at for picking-up the remote control and banished to the garden to amuse themselves.

Read on, and you discover Lez's recipe for avoiding such disasters, starting with ensuring that your dog knows that you are the leader of the pack. This is a subject to which she gives great importance, as all her training is based on the fact that the dog recognises you as the pack leader. She reminds the reader that dogs are canines, not primates, so there's no need to shout at them, as they have excellent hearing and the dog's brain works differently from our own. One of the biggest secrets in the world of gundog trainers is that the dog actually has a choice as to whether it comes back or not. It's a secret the dog should never find out, she writes.

Praise and motivation

One of the plus points of *The Pet Gundog* is the fact that it includes many ideas that are absent from any of the many gundog training books already on my shelves. The chapter *Discipline, praise and motivation* is sure to raise eyebrows in the traditionalist camp, as Lez believes in the use of food rewards and she points out that there are few



Gundogs

By David Tomlinson



The chocolate debate continues: is it suitable for dogs on a shoot day?

I am a chocoholic and like it any way it comes — plain, milk, with nuts or fruit, or in cake form. It's one of life's pleasures that I don't share with my dogs, though they seem to work on the basis that if I like something, they will, too. I remember sharing a satsuma with Fleur on one of her first shooting day lunches — she hasn't retained her enthusiasm for oranges, though she remains remarkably omnivorous.

I used to be a member of a shoot where one of the Guns always gave his pair of German shorthaired pointers a Mars bar each at lunchtime. His reasoning was that the sugar in the Mars bar gave the dogs the extra energy they needed for a shooting day. His dogs never suffered from any ill effects and lived to a ripe old age. I now know that the last thing you should give a dog is chocolate and that there are more sensible ways of keeping its energy levels up.

The trouble with chocolate is that it is made from cocoa beans, which contain a chemical named theobromine. This is closely related to caffeine, which chocolate also contains. Theobromine is a long-lasting and potent toxin that can cause death in dogs. If a dog consumes sufficient theobromine, it will be poisoned and

Cocoa beans contain theobromine — a potent toxin that can cause death in dogs

dogs that aren't food motivated: *I encourage the use of food as a motivator when training new exercises, although never when training retrieving... but if you choose to use food, don't rely on it.*

I also liked Lez's observation that, when training a dog, we should be conscious of our own facial expressions: *Whenever your gundog is doing what you want him to do, especially in training, smile, get into the habit of it now and it will make your training at distance a lot easier.*

Smiling gundog trainers? That's a novel thought, as most people look deadly serious when training their dogs. It's little gems such as this that make this book a refreshingly different read. As you would expect, there's advice on how to get your dog to do all the basics we expect of a gundog, such as sit, stay, recall and retrieve, all explained simply and sensibly. I also like the suggestion of teaching your dog to retrieve mobile phones and car keys, a handy trick if you should accidentally drop either.

If you've trained dogs before, you may not agree with all of Lez's suggestions and advice, but it's quite clear that the techniques she uses work well for her and for her pupils with pet gundogs. Inspired by her first book, Lez is now busy working on her next one, *The Pet Gundog Puppy*. Until it is published, my best recommendation of *The Pet Gundog* is that it is the sort of book that anyone selling a working gundog puppy into a pet home should give to the new owners when they collect their dog. I've no doubt that pet gundogs belonging to owners sensible enough to have read this book are unlikely to need rehoming. ■

To buy *The Pet Gundog*, visit www.thepetgundog.co.uk.

will typically respond by vomiting. It is likely to show obvious signs of pain and may also drink frequently and have difficulty in standing. A severely affected dog is also likely to suffer from an increased rate of breathing, together with muscle tremors, and may eventually have convulsions that lead to its death.

There's not too much theobromine in milk chocolate, which might explain why those Mars bar-eating German shorthaired pointers never seemed to suffer. It's present in greater quantities in dark chocolate, and especially in Luxury Continental brands with at least 70 per cent cocoa bean content. Most cases of dogs suffering from chocolate poisoning occur after they have eaten the latter, though cocoa powder is equally dangerous.

Christmas is when the majority of cases of chocolate poisoning occur. Theobromine has no specific antidote, so if you suspect that your dog may have eaten a quantity of chocolate (about 6oz of dark chocolate can prove fatal to a dog the size of a springer) get it to a vet as quickly as possible. Don't be lulled into a false sense of security because the dog seems okay, as dogs have a much slower rate of digestion than humans. The good news is that dogs treated quickly enough usually survive and there are no long-term effects from the poisoning. ■

You can email David at STgundog@aol.com.

Next week A year in the life of a gundog columnist — David looks back over the controversies of the past 12 months